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Israel Believed Gravest Threat To King Hussein

The assassination of Lebanon's Bashir Gemayel demonstrates the danger of a U.S. policy dependent on an individual in an area where murders and coups are commonplace. Yet this is the position the United States has put itself in by the crucial role it assigns to Jordan's King Hussein in the Reagan peace plan for the Middle East.

The scary fact is that Hussein is nearly as vulnerable to violent overthrow as was Gemayel, and from many of the same sources.

The CIA and the State Department consider Israel to be Hussein's gravest threat. Indeed, CIA sources told my associate Dale Van Atta the Israelis are believed to have tried in the past to terminate Hussein's rule and possibly his life.

Well aware of the Israeli menace, Hussein has formed a new palace guard of loyal Bedouins whose twin mission is to protect him from Israeli covert attacks and Palestinian terrorists.

Israel's headstrong determination to pursue its narrow goal of retaining the West Bank, and its leaders' repeated statements that Hussein

must go, are regarded by State Department experts as both simplistic and, in the long run, counterproductive. A recent secret department document summed up the situation this way in the wake of the Lebanon war:

"The Palestinian movement [could] disintegrate into radical splinter groups, which in combination with other revolutionary forces in the region, would pose a grave threat to the moderate Arab governments in the region. Israel seems determined to vent this threat through the overthrow of the Jordanian monarchy, and can be expected to greatly expand its covert cooperation with revolutionary movements."

In other words, Israel is seen as willing to subvert the very Arab moderates who might eventually agree to a general peace in the Middle East, simply because these moderates want Israel to give back the West Bank.

Whether Hussein's revamped palace guard can protect him from his diverse enemies remains to be seen. But he has survived for more than 30 years now, through a combination of political skill, courage and a little bit of luck. In July, 1951, the teenage Hussein was standing beside his grandfather, King Abdullah, when assassins murdered the monarch at a mosque in East Jerusalem.

Hussein escaped death when a bullet was deflected by a medal on

his chest. A year later he became king when his father was removed because of mental illness.

Since that first miraculous escape, the diminutive king has survived at least 16 assassination attempts, and has managed to survive his own death-defying stunts at the controls of high-speed cars, planes and helicopters.

More than once, Hussein has snuffed out rebellion among his army officers by the gutsy expedient, of appearing in their midst and daring them to kill him.

The greatest threat to his regime came from the Palestinian guerrillas who flooded into Jordan from the West Bank after the 1967 war. In 1970, faced with anarchy, Hussein unleashed his loyal Bedouin-led army on Palestine Liberation Organization forces and drove them out of Jordan.

Today, though Palestinians make up 65 percent of Jordan's population and dominate the major professions, Hussein "will not accede to PLO demands for an expanded presence in Jordan," according to a Pentagon intelligence report. Nor will he let the PLO use his country as a base against Israel. Despite this, the Israelis still want to get rid of the king.

Footnote: Any allegation that the Israeli government had or was attempting to overthrow or do bodily harm to King Hussein, said an Israeli embassy spokesperson, is "nonsense."